

D&D Fiction

Shadows of Stormreach: Chapter 6

Eberron Fiction
by Keith Baker



The bustling frontier city of Stormreach, a cauldron on ambition and secret plots, has grown safe and secure as the only gateway to the riches of Xen'drik. But now danger threatens!

So begins the introduction to [Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach](#). Can you discover the secret mysteries that threaten Stormreach's very existence? For that, you'll need to learn more about this city of Eberron -- continuing with this latest chapter in Keith Baker's latest tale: *Shadows of Stormreach*.

Petra said the tunnel had been built by giants, and Shadow could see why. Even a team of ogres would have trouble working with the massive blocks of stone used in the ancient walls. And then there were the lightstones—orbis of cold fire much like those found in Sharn or Stormreach itself, but easily three times the size of the usual streetlamp. *How many thousands of years have these been shining in the depths?* she wondered.

The halfling stayed a short distance ahead of the others, clinging to any darkness she could find. As she crept forward, Shadow searched for any sort of trap that might lie in their path—pressure plates, tripwires, the vague shimmer that hinted at the presence of a magical glyph. She found nothing, and this made her even more uncomfortable.



The others were whispering behind her. She couldn't quite make out the words, but the sound was annoying. It seemed that there weren't many people down here, but that was no reason to be careless. Shadow turned and caught Marcus's eye, touching a finger to her lips. The whispering continued as she crept forward, and she turned again, anger growing. Then she realized—

The sounds weren't coming from behind her. They weren't the voices of her friends. They didn't seem to be coming from any one direction. Shadow wasn't even sure if she was hearing them or if the voices were entirely in her mind. When she tried to focus on the words, she found that she couldn't hear anything. But the moment she let her attention slip away, the sound began again, and she had a nagging certainty the voices were talking about her.

"Try to ignore it." This voice was crisp and clear. This was one of Petra's magical gifts. "The effect is a minor telepathic projection. It may be derived from an object—much like the organic key we found earlier—or the

barriers between the worlds may be weak in this place. These could be the voices of Xoriat, and if so, listening to them could be a path to insanity."

Shadow shuddered, and she heard – or felt – the voices titter and laugh. Xoriat was said to be the source of all madness, and thinking of the warped warforged and the strange hatchway, the thought that this place might be touched by an unearthly force seemed all too plausible. She continued on, doing her best to ignore the mocking whispers. Soon the hall curved to the west. Patterns of light and shadow suggested that a larger chamber lay around the corner and that there was activity within.

Shadow paused, raising her hand and calling the others to a halt. Pressing close to the wall, she inched toward the bend. She'd scouted a hundred dangerous locations in the past; she'd prowled through graveyards, and even explored a dragon's lair – though mercifully, one long abandoned. But as she crept forward, she felt fear rising along her spine. Each step was more difficult than the last.

They're watching me. She could feel it. They'd known she was here from the moment she entered the warehouse. *They're waiting.* Just around the corner, most likely. It was a game. And she was the prey.

Marcus, Petra, even Spike... they'll abandon me at the first sign of trouble. They've probably been planning this all along. They're all working together.

If I just stay here... if I don't move... I'll be safe.

NO! Gathering all her inner strength, Shadow silenced the voices and forced down her fear. Steeling her nerves, she slipped around the corner.

Color and light washed over the small chamber before her. Cold fire blazed within four pillars; each was a chaotic blur of a hundred hues, blending and shifting with each second. Despite the distraction of the shimmering light, Shadow spotted a warforged soldier to either side of the door. Her eyes seemed to be sharper than theirs, for neither appeared to have noticed her. Both warforged were disfigured in the same manner as the guard they'd fought earlier, the sigils on their foreheads replaced with pits of swirling light.

A long altar of white marble lay in the exact center of the chamber, and an armored figure was stretched along its length. A third warforged, seemingly inert. An orb of crystal about the same size as Shadow's head floated over the altar, filled with the same brilliant light as the columns Shadow was no wizard, but even she could sense the powerful energy boiling out from the orb. A gaunt man, dressed in tattered black robes, bent over the warforged, engraving runes along its torso with a thin, golden blade. Peering around the corner, Shadow couldn't see the artisan's head; a high collar hid his features.

Now what, Shadow thought. Drop back, plan the best way to deal with the two guards—

She didn't have a chance to complete the thought. The man in the center of the room turned, whirling around with uncanny speed. The movement revealed a horror. The stranger wasn't a man at all. Pale white eyes gleamed in a head covered in oily green skin. Four long tentacles writhed around a lamprey's mouth. *A mind flayer... one of the minions of madness.*

Shadow could feel the creature's outrage, a crushing pressure in her mind. Its anger swept over her, a terrible barrage of alien thoughts, and it was all she could do to stay on her feet. Shadow staggered back a step, the voices mocking her, hinting at the terrible fate that awaited her. She tried to find the strength to signal her

friends, to call them, but all strength had left her.

None was needed. Spike was already at her side, Marcus close behind. Spike charged, and the priest paused to whisper a prayer. A shock of silver flame burned the terror from Shadow's mind, and she could move again. There was no time to speak, but her eyes met his, and Shadow knew that no words were needed.

Spike might have had trouble with the first of the tainted warforged, but this time he was unstoppable. The stones embedded in his arms and legs blazed, and he'd already brought down one of the warped guards. He and Marcus joined forces against the second warforged, hammering at the soldier with a relentless flurry of blows. Shadow was worried about the master, not the guards. But the tentacled horror at the center of the room seemed almost indifferent to them. It stood watching the battle, as if it was curious to see whether its twisted servants would survive without its aid.

Petra had arrived, and with a gesture she flung a crackling bolt of electricity at the creature. Few beings could withstand such an attack, but the bolt of lightning didn't even touch it. The magical energy dissipated before striking the mind flayer, and Shadow could feel its disdain. She felt its shift in focus. Petra's right hand slowly rose, moving inch by inch toward Marcus and Spike. Her face was a rigid mask, and Shadow could only imagine the struggle going on the elf's mind.

Shadow cursed. *What could she do?* As skilled an archer as she was, she'd heard tales of these creatures. Much like the wererats, normal weapons had little effect on the children of Xoriat. But she had to do something. Studying the room, she made her choice. Raising her bow, she loosed an arrow at the crystal sphere floating over the altar.

Her aim was true. The arrow struck the orb dead center, and a flash of energy wiped away all sight and thought.

"It vanished?" Link sounded skeptical.

"We were only blinded for a few seconds," Shadow said, staring into her mug. Laughter and voices were all around her, but these belonged to the patrons of the Leaky Dinghy, and she took some comfort in the sheer banality of the scene. "When I could see again, the orb had shattered, the light had faded from the columns, and the monster was nowhere to be seen."

"And the warforged on the altar?"

"Petra's working on it now, but she thinks he'll be fine. The other three... there's nothing she can do for them. Something twisted their spirits, warping them from within. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

"What do you mean?" Link's voice was pure innocence, but Shadow wasn't fooled.

"You weren't interested in the Bilge Rats," she said. "You knew that someone was preying on warforged. What I want to know is if you were just concerned that this killer might eventually catch up with you or if you were acting on behalf of someone else."

"Shadow, you wound me—"

"Not yet."

"Please," Link continued. "I admit, I have concealed the truth, but only because I did not think it would matter. There are those who say that the first warforged were created in this land, tens of thousands of years before my kind were born in the forges of House Cannith. If this is true, the knowledge of the past could be vital to the future of my race. But I fear there are others who would use it to enslave us ... or to enslave you. And what you have found tonight shows that those fears are justified. I only hope that the artifact you destroyed was the only one of its kind. You found nothing else?"

"That's right."

"Nothing at all? No scrolls or crystals? I'm not just looking out for my own interests. This could affect your friend Spike, as well."

"I'm quite aware of that," Shadow said. "And no, there was nothing else. And if you ever want me to do any work for you again... you'd better have gold, and you'd better tell me everything you know, right from the start. Otherwise, I'll get Spike to twist your head off. Do I make myself clear?"

"Absolutely."

"Does that mean I don't get to twist his head off tonight?" Spike said.

"I'm afraid so," Shadow said. "Put him down, and let's get back to Petra and Marcus."

Spike's gemstones dimmed, but he lowered Link into the chair and released his grip on the scout's neck.

"Take my thanks to your comrades, Shadow," Link said, settling into the chair. "You've done a good deed tonight. And in Stormreach, that's a rare treasure indeed."

Shadow shrugged and made her way through the crowd. A moment later they were on the streets and heading for home. Link's words were still on her mind. *You found nothing else in the vault?* It hadn't been much of a lie. They hadn't found anything of substance, anything that could be used. But there was one scrap of parchment, a mere fragment of a tome or scroll. Age had blurred the text beyond recognition, but it was clear the mind flayer had been trying to reconstruct it. And one thing could be seen—the image of a warforged, an elf, and a giant—and the warforged was shown as being the same size as the giant. She wished she could trust Link, but she was certain the smuggler had a hidden agenda of his own. *I fear there are others who would use it to enslave us... or to enslave you.* What could it mean?

Time will tell, I'm sure. For now, it was time to forget about wererats and mind flayers and look forward to a warm bed. Whatever the future would bring, tonight they'd done a good deed.

And in Stormreach, that was a rare treasure indeed.

Keith Baker has been an avid fan of **Dungeons & Dragons** since grade school. His life took a dramatic turn in 2002 when he submitted the world of Eberron to the Wizards of the Coast Fantasy Setting Search. In addition to developing the ***Eberron Campaign Setting*** and ***Shadows of the Last War***, he has worked for Atlas Games, Goodman Games, and Green Ronin.

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